Fiscal Breakthrough Feels Betrayal and They’re Not Happy

**By Carl Hulse**

As 2023 opened with Republicans newly in control of the House, the far-right members of the party considered themselves empowered when it came to federal spending, with increased muscle to achieve the budge cuts of their dreams.

But it turned out that many of their Republican colleagues did not share their vision of stark fiscal restraint. Or at least not fervently enough to go up against a Democratic Senate and White House to try to bring it into fruition.

Instead, Speaker Mike Johnson on Friday pushed through a $1.2 trillion bipartisan package to fund the government for the rest of the year, with none of the deep cuts or policy changes those ultraconservatives had demanded. Those on the right fringe have been left boiling mad and threatening to make hi the second Republican speaker to be deposed this term.

“The speaker failed us today,” declared Representative Thomaas Massie, Republican of Kentucky, after one of his ultraright colleagues, Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene, Republican of Georgia, filed a measure to potentially force a vote to remove Mr. Johnson, over a spending plan she called “atrocious” and “a betrayal.”

The vote and its bitter aftermath brought to a head the simmering tensions among congressional Republicans about difficult spending issues including whether to force a government shutdown to try to achieve their budge aims – a divide that once again has sent House Republicans spiraling into chaos.

The looming challenge to Mr. Johnson from within sparked quick recriminations from other Republicans, who accused their colleagues of sowing discord that harms their own party and its chances of success in a pivotal election for control of Congress in November.

“The issues are on our side, but we have to show that we can govern and that we can work as a unit,” said Representative Mike Lawler, Republican of New York, who is facing a tough re-election race in aa district that President Biden won in 2020. “Doing things like this, obviously, makes chaos and creates unnecessary distractions.”

The house passage of the spending bill, which still had to be approved by the Senate, marked an end to a tortured process that included a close call with a federal default, vicious G.O.P. fights over spending levels, the removal of a speaker and repeated flirtations with shutting down the government.

In the end, the bills funding the government represented traditional compromise measures. They gave each party some wins, some losses and some election-year talking points while providing federal agencies with substantial financial resources through Sept. 30.

But the legislation was assailed by members of the House Freedom Caucus, the far-right bloc that has bedeviled its own party’s speakers for years, as a betrayal by Mr. Johnson, for both its content and the way it was handled.

Not only did members of the far right not get the steep cuts and severe border restrictions they had sought to stop the “weaponization” of the Justice Department, with worst of the truly contentious proposals stripped out because Democrats would not accept them.

And while the entirety of federal spending was split into two big bills instead of one, it was still the sort of huge, last-minute, leadership-driven spending package that Republicans had promised to eliminate when they took charge. To add insult to injury, the debate violated the rule to provide lawmakers with at least 72 hours to review the bill – a standard that is sacrosanct to the right wing after having been jammed for time y Democrats for years.

“When it came down to it, they just surrendered,” said Representative Ralph Norman, Republican of South Carolina, and a Freedom Caucus member, about his colleagues who rejected the far-right ‘s calls to kill the legislation.

But in making hardline demands in a narrowly divided Congress, the right wing essentially dealt itself out the process, in large part because it was from the start that they were highly unlikely to vote for any spending bill, even if they got what they demanded. The situation left Mr. Johnson, who sees himself as a right-wing Republican, unable to produce sufficient Republican votes to pass legislation, and therefore with little choice but to work with Democrats to do so. The bill approved by the House on Friday, like those that came before it, reflected that dynamic.

At the same time, a significant number of House Republicans remain reluctant to shut down the government, both for the political recriminations it could stir and the damage shutdowns cause the federal agencies in the form of funding shortfalls and repeated disruptions. Republicans also warned on Friday that Pentagon spending would be cut if the legislation failed and noted the grave uncertainty in the world.

“A ‘no’ vote is a vote for China, Russia, Iran, Noth Korea and Hamas,” said Representative Ken Calvert, the California Republican who heads a House panel responsible for setting military spending, who is also facing a potentially tight re-election contest, “Vote ‘yes’ for our men and women in uniform and for all Americans and for our country.”

Still, the ultraconservatives weren’t swayed, and branded the legislation the product of Washington’s “swamp” and a “uni-party” of Democrats and Republicans. “This is garbage,” said Representative Eli Crane, Republican of Arizona.

In setting up a potential challenge to Mr. Johnson, Ms. Taylor Greene said she was firing a warning shot toward the speaker. She previously threatened to try ot oust Mr. Johnson if he were to bring forward legislation to fund military assistance for Ukraine, one of the last remaining high-priority items for this Congress.

“He passed a budget that should have never been brought to the floor, did not represent our conference,” she said. “And it was passed with the Democrats and without the majority of the majority.”

“We have to find a new speaker for the House,” she added.

Democrats have repeatedly suggested that they would come to Mr. Johnson’s aid should Republicans move to out hm. They bemoaned the damage being done to the House by the constant turmoil and infighting.

“It is going to undermine very substantially the institution,” sai Representative Steny H. Hoyer, Democrat of Maryland and ta former majority leader.

“And I think it is very regrettable that we people on the floor of the House of Representatives believe their opinion is so superior to the opinion of others.

“We need to have the ability to work together,” he said, “Not have a small group threaten that if one side works with the other they will retaliate.”